

Documents on Diplomacy: Resources

Humanitarian Aid in WWI: Readings

A *Ambassador Page (London) to the Secretary of State, November 3, 1914*

For the Secretary and Mr. House:
The International Commission for Relief of Belgium, of which Herbert Hoover here is active chairman, has diplomatic arrangements complete by all governments concerned and has written guaranty of German military commander in Belgium that food for starving Belgians shall not be diverted. It works under joint chairmanship of Spanish Ambassador here, myself, American and Spanish Ministers to Belgium and to Holland, and it has the only available transportation of food from Rotterdam to Belgian places of distribution and the only available machinery for universal distribution in Belgium. It handles a relief given by various European Governments and private subscriptions and help taken up in neutral European countries. The problem is practically insoluble to feed something like four million starving people.

The generous work of the United States seems to have many over-lapping activities and organizations which to a degree defeat one another. It is desirable, if possible, that one central, wholly American committee be created through which all organizations may send food. I hear the President has been asked to appoint such a committee. If you think it wise advise such a course, concentrate all efforts. Hoover will send explicit directions how much food, what kinds of food, how to ship, in what quantities, and at what intervals so as to coordinate work done in United States with work done in Europe. Answer.

AMERICAN AMBASSADOR

978. File No. 840.48/890

Source

United States Department of State, Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs, 1914, Supplement, The World War, pp. 814-815

B *Ambassador Page (London) to the Secretary of State, January 27, 1915*

Hoover asks me transmit to you the following message: Potatoes and meat upon which Belgians have been partially dependent up to the present are now being rapidly exhausted and the cost of foodstuffs required to keep this population alive will forthwith increase from the six million to ten million dollars per month. Furthermore within thirty days three million French people north of German lines will be in similar position. Another fifteen million dollars will have absolutely exhausted the whole resources which we can possibly look forward to, leaving a period of three to four months before next harvest entirely hopeless unless support can be obtained from the belligerent governments. I believe the Allied Governments despite their view that they have no responsibility could be brought to make substantial contributions provided the Germans would cease to wring monetary indemnities from these people. To have this population thus fed must be even on military grounds a vast advantage to the Germans which far outweighs the value of the money which they now secure from their present method and from a humane point of view, if this situation is driven to its logical extreme, the moral responsibility for the decimation of the population must be laid at the German door.

I go to Berlin to-morrow for the purpose of making representations to the German Government that if they would agree to stop all requisitions of every character, and would do so conditionally upon the Allies' giving adequate financial support to this commission, I have reason to believe I can secure large help from Allied Governments. In making this plea to the German Government it would help to have support of German opinion in America.

On account of the importance of the matter I think it advisable that you should know of this, and I even venture the suggestion that if it meet with your approval the German Ambassador be informed of it informally with a view to the possible enlistment of his influence.

The Germans cannot afford to have these issues tried in the court of American public opinion and they can well afford, not only

from a point of view of military advantage but also of American public opinion, and above all, of humanity, to have this question settled on the above lines. I believe the Allied Governments have every confidence in the integrity of and ability of this commission to carry out the work, and, great as the task is, we should find ample compensation in doing it in the prestige it would win for our country and its ideals. Hoover

AMERICAN AMBASSADOR

1540. File No. 855.48/16

Source

United States Department of State, *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs*, 1915, Supplement, *The World War*, pp. 1026–1027

C *Ambassador Brand Whitlock in Belgium to the Secretary of State*

I have had it in mind, and I might say, on my conscience, since the Germans began to deport Belgian workmen early in November of 1916, to prepare for the Department a detailed report on this latest instance of brutality, but there have been so many obstacles in the way of obtaining evidence on which a calm and judicious opinion could be based, and one is so overwhelmed with the horror of the thing itself, that it has been, and even now is, difficult to write calmly and justly about it. . . .

The deportations began in October in the *etape*, at Ghent and at Bruges. . . .

Their seizures in Brussels were made evidently with much greater care than in the provinces, with more regard for the appearances. There was no public announcement of the intention to deport, but suddenly certain men in towns whose names were on the list of *chomeurs* received summonses notifying them to report at one of the railway stations on a given day and penalties were fixed for failure to respond to the summons, and there was printed on the card an offer of employment by the German Government, either in Germany or Belgium. . . .

The Commission for Relief in Belgium had secured permission to give to each deported man a loaf of bread, and some of the communes provided warm clothing for those who had none, and in addition a small financial allowance. . . .

The rage, the terror, and despair excited by this measure all over Belgium were beyond anything we had witnessed since the day the

Germans poured into Brussels. The delegates of the Commission for Relief in Belgium, returning to Brussels, told the most distressing stories of the scenes of cruelty and sorrow attending the seizures. And daily, hourly, almost, since that time, appalling stories have been related by Belgians coming to the legation. . . .

Transportation everywhere in Belgium is difficult, the vicinal railways scarcely operating anymore because of the lack of oil, while all the horses have been taken. The people who are forced to go from one village to another must do so on foot or in vans drawn by the few miserable horses that are left. The wagons of the breweries, the one institution that the Germans have scrupulously respected, are hauled by oxen.

The well-known tendency of sensational reports to exaggerate themselves, especially in time of war, and in a situation like that existing here, with no newspapers to serve as a daily clearing house for all the rumours that are as avidly believed as they are eagerly repeated, should, of course, be considered, but even if a modicum of all that is told is true, there still remains enough to stamp this deed as one of the foulest that history records.

I am constantly in receipt of reports from all over Belgium that tend to bear out the stories one constantly hears of brutality and cruelty. A number of men sent back to Mons were in a dying condition, many of them tubercular. At Malines and at Antwerp returned men died, their friends asserting that they had been victims of neglect and cruelty, of cold, of exposure, of hunger.

I have had requests from the Burgomasters of ten communes from La Louviere, asking that permission be obtained to send to the deported men in Germany packages of food similar to those that are being sent to prisoners of war. Thus far the German authorities have refused to permit this except in special instances, and returning Belgians claim that even when such packages are received they are used by the camp authorities only as another means of coercing them to sign the agreements to work.

It is said that in spite of the liberal salary promised those who would sign voluntarily no money has as yet been received in Belgium from workmen in Germany. . . .

Source: *Records of the Great War*, Vol. IV, ed. Charles F. Horne, National Alumni 1923

http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/belgium_whitlock.htm

E

Extracts from the Memoirs of Herbert Hoover

A QUESTION OF MILITARY STRATEGY

During the last half of 1917 and the early part of 1918, the Allied Governments were in constant turmoil of indecision on major military strategy. It also involved food. The question was. Should we send a large American Army to Europe? In the early stages the British and French military authorities opposed a large American Army, believing that they could handle the situation with the aid of our fleet, some special services, such as air forces, engineers, together with ample food and munitions.

General Pershing and our military leaders did not believe we could quickly end the war without large ground troops and were insistent that they be sent. But this could not be done without positive assurance of British and French ships for troop transport and supplies. But for them to furnish the ships they must abandon their long voyages to the Southern Hemisphere, China, and the Indies for supplies, and depend upon Canada and the United States. This in turn involved sacrifice of their foreign trade in many parts of the world. They greatly feared we could not produce the supplies. There was some reason for this trepidation in view of our prewar record of exports and the fact that we had two partial crop failures in 1916 and 1917.

Also, in the background was the specter of German submarine sinkings. In April, 1917, the month we entered the war, more than 850,000 tons of merchant ships were sunk. . . .

It was my contribution to this strategy, by assurance of food to the Allies, that caused General Pershing to inscribe a note to me later which I may be permitted the vanity of reproducing: "For Herbert Hoover, whose contribution to the success of the Allied cause can hardly be overestimated." (PP. 255-256)

THE FOOD BLOCKADE

To lower the morale of the enemy by reducing his food supply was one of the major strategies of the war. I did not myself believe in the food blockade. I did not believe that it was the effective weapon of which the Allies were so confident. I did not believe in starving women and children. And above all, I did not believe that stunted bodies and deformed minds in the next generation were secure foundations upon which to rebuild civilization.

The facts were that soldiers, government officials, munitions workers and farmers in enemy countries would always be fed; that the impact of blockade was upon the weak and the women and children. Moreover, because of the food blockade, Germany had no need to spend money abroad and she would have long since gone broke if she could have bought what her public would have demanded. I insisted that the war would not be won by the

blockade on food for women and children, but by the blockade on military supplies and by military action. . . (P. 257)

Source

Volume I: *The Years of Adventure, 1874-1920.* (1952)

<http://www.econcode.com/hover/ebooks/displayPage.cfm?BookID=B1&VolumeID=B1V1>

G

Albert, King of the Belgians to President Wilson, October 18, 1917

HIS EXCELLENCY DR. WOODROW WILSON:
During more than three years the American Commission for Relief under Mr. Hoover's able leadership has achieved with marked success and under the most trying circumstances the task of supplying the Belgian nation with the bare necessities of life. Moreover, Your Excellency's Government has lately assumed the burden of financing the Commission.

Those unmistakable marks of sympathy make me feel confident that whatever the difficulties may be, the United States will never allow their noble work to be jeopardized. However, since several months the imports of foodstuffs have been inadequate and the last reports which reach me from the invaded territory are such that I consider it my duty to make a personal appeal to your intervention. The Belgian population is confronted not only with hardship and suffering but with actual famine, the death rate is steadily increasing. Infantile mortality is appalling. Tuberculosis is spreading and threatening the future of the race. Only by immediate and energetic action can the lives of many of my unhappy people be saved during the impending winter. My Government has put all available ships at the disposal of the Commission and is unable to provide for more. For the additional transports as well as for cargoes and financial means, Belgium must rely entirely upon the United States. I do not doubt but Your Excellency will give to Mr. Hoover full power to meet the present emergency with adequate measures, and in such conditions we are confident that Mr. Hoover will assure the success of the great task he has nobly assumed in the name of the American nation.

ALBERT

Source

United States Department of State, Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs, 1914, Supplement 2, The World War, pp. 460-461

I *Ambassador Stovall in Switzerland to the Secretary of State, July 31, 1917*

At the request of and expense of Polish General Committee of Vevey, I transmit following telegram addressed to Secretary of State:

Referring previous memorandum, take liberty inform you situation Poland becomes daily worse. Closed factories cause all population industrial centers out of work. In the country district situation equally disastrous; no workmen, no animals for transport, no agricultural implements or seed, quarter of land uncultivated. All products of soil monopolized and requisitioned by occupying powers, except small part, insufficient for Polish population, hence extreme penury of articles of food. Famine attacking millions adults and more children. Present generation threatened with destruction unless prompt aid is given. In this terrible crisis our supreme hope is in benevolence of the United States of America. In the name of General Committee, I take liberty to beg you to be our benevolent interpreter to Government of great Republic that she may give Poland same protection as Belgium by sending food in most practical way. To provide food for Poland is duty of occupying powers, but if they do not, that is no reason why millions of innocent Polish victims should perish from famine. Our Committee previously negotiated through Mr. Gerard, United States Ambassador at Berlin, on the subject, but negotiations had no result, German Government having refused to allow Polish population to employ all products of country. Political situation being now changed, take liberty resume question of providing food for Poland which is vital for her future.

If American Government gives favorable decision, hope Allies will do utmost to save martyred Polish population from certain extermination. . .Relief is given to people all religions. Warsaw feeds more than 300,000 people by public kitchens but provisions now exhausted and no [more in sight.] President Wilson with approval of whole civilized world [stated] important to save present [population] threatened with extermination by famine. Millions of lives to be saved. The United States which since opening of hostilities have given many proofs of generosity will, we hope, fulfill humanitarian duty for Poland as for Belgium, strengthening ties

which united Poland to great Republic since war of independence [and winning] profound gratitude of whole nation which will owe its existence to the great and noble American nation. General Polish Committee, President of the Executive Commission, Osuchowski.

STOVALL

1330.

Source

United States Department of State, Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs, 1918, Supplement 2, The World War, p. 504